Course Proposal for Spring 2020

The Climate Crisis: A Global Historical Exploration

It comes as a surprise to most that the science relating to it’s incidence was already well known by the late 1950s. In fact, even the technology to substantially reduce our carbon emissions already exists. Well into the twenty-first century, however, fossil fuels are being extracted at accelerating rates around the world. Smokestacks and exhaust pipes in turn keep belching this carbon into the atmosphere. At this point in the twenty-first century it is clear that decisive action is not held back by a lack of appropriate scientific knowledge or technology. Climate change is a social problem. A historical vision, consequently, is irreplaceable if climate change is to be tackled.

This course will explore our current climate crisis by trying to answer four historical questions. First, how did we come to depend on fossil fuels and what did it mean for social life? Here we will explore the history that keeps us locked into the pathways of burning ever more fossil fuels. The second question we’ll explore is how societies around the globe have responded to previous periods of climatic shift? Linked to this, we’ll be studying whether there are any lessons to be learned from how climatic transformations have affected Indian society in particular? Apart from India, case studies will span Japan, the Ottoman Empire and the USA. In all these instances, we’ll be investigating the social mediations that shape the impact of natural transformations. In particular, we’ll ask whether these impacts are equitably shared and how social power intersects with natural environments. Finally, any action to mitigate climate change will necessarily be global in scope. We will, therefore, explore the history of our existing global governance arrangements to see whether they are equipped to solve problems on a global scale. Are there alternative traditions that point a better way forward?

While there are no pre-requisites, this will be a challenging course covering a number of different historical periods and drawing on disciplinary perspectives from the sciences and social sciences. You can expect to leave, however, with a much richer sense of the challenge that climate change poses to contemporary life – in the global and Indian context.

The readings will consist of brief sections from the following texts (the final list will be no more than 18 readings)


